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'It was super cool just having that much melanin in Montana': The climbers aiming to boost diversity

By Ben Church, CNN
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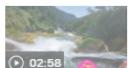
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'Black Ice': The men and women making climbing more diverse



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(CNN) — Whether it's a comment about his hair or questioning his expertise, professional ice climber Manoah Ainuu is aware that people notice the difference.

Born to first-generation immigrants from Samoa and Ethiopia, the 26-year-old grew up in the outskirts of Los Angeles but later moved to Bozeman, Montana, when he went to college.

It was there that he fell in love with the outdoors and the spectacular ice climbing opportunities Montana has to offer.



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Ainuu taught himself how to climb and is now a seasoned professional, embarking on trips across the United States

But he says living in a predominately White area, whilst taking part in a sport with few other Black athletes, weighs heavily on him.

Despite not recalling any overtly racist incidents, the climber says it is more an accumulation of "microaggressions" from both the local and climbing community, such as people commentating on his dreadlocks.

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"Most people are like 'Oh, it's a compliment, it's kindness,' but what it happens to be kind of backhanded," Ainuu tells CNN Sport. "They're seeing that you're different and feel like they have to say something about it."

"I'm pretty mellow, so I just ignore a lot of stuff. If someone says some stupid racist thing, I'm like: 'Whatever, I've heard this before.'

"But it really does weigh down on you. It all builds up and whether a person handles that by bottling it up or ignoring it, there's still an effect."

With films such as *"Free Solo"* making it into the mainstream and with climbing gyms on the rise, the sport has witnessed a boom in recent years.

But the cost of clothing and safety equipment acts as a huge barrier to entry for many

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With films such as ["Free Solo"](#) making it into the mainstream and with climbing gyms on the rise, the sport has witnessed a boom in recent years.

But the cost of clothing and safety equipment acts as a huge barrier to entry for many and the lack of representation amongst the world's top professionals is being recognized more than ever before.

Now a member of The North Face's elite climbing team, Ainuu wants to change the narrative around outdoor adventure sports.

"I don't really like being in the spotlight, having all this attention brought to me, but what I've realized is [...] there are so many people that are looking up to me [...] and all these other Black and African-American climbers or athletes or musicians," he says.

"Just seeing someone that looks like you, doing something and excelling at it is extremely empowering."

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Austin Schmitz/ The North Face

Manoah Ainuu is an accomplished ice climber.

Black Ice

It's why Ainuu was so excited to be part of a new documentary film called ["Black Ice"](#) which looks at a collaboration with [Memphis Rox](#) - a not-for-profit climbing gym in South Memphis, US.

The center provides a safe haven for people away from the streets; a place to relax and dive into a sport that may at first seem unfamiliar. No one is turned away, regardless of their ability to pay.

Through its inclusivity and caring ethos, the organization has opened up the world of climbing to the local community which suffers from poverty and a lack of opportunity, especially in Black communities.



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Elena Delavega, Associate Professor at the University of Memphis, tells CNN Sport that South Memphis is one of the poorest areas of the city which is "underserved and under-resourced."

She also says the area is under threat from encroaching gentrification.

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"That is a problem for this neighborhood because there is a desire to remove the traditional residents and to 'improve' the area," she says.

"But no improvements are happening while poor people live there."

According to the 2020 Memphis Poverty fact sheet, the poverty rate for the city is 21.7%, with the percentage higher among minority groups.

The "Black Ice" film documents how members of the gym's staff, many of whom had never been ice climbing before, travel to Montana where they met with Ainuu, fellow ice climber Fred Campbell and climbing legend Conrad Anker.

Learning from the experts, the Memphis Rox team spend time scaling frozen waterfalls and skiing in some of the coldest temperatures they've experienced.

"It was super cool. I mean, just having that much melanin in Montana," Ainuu laughs.

[READ: Trailblazing climber Sasha DiGiulian was told 'little girls don't belong'](#)



Reel Rock Film Tour

"Black Ice" documented an ice climbing trip to Montana, US.

Better representation

Malik Martin, the official photographer at Memphis Rox who worked as a filmmaker on "Black Ice," is acutely aware of the problems presented to young people growing up in Memphis.

Better representation
Malik Martin, the official photographer at Memphis Rox who worked as a filmmaker on "Black Ice," is acutely aware of the problems presented to young people growing up in Memphis.

"There isn't a lot of sympathy from society for people in my neighborhood, people in our circumstances," Martin tells CNN Sport. "There's a million traps for you to fall into between just trying to live and survive."

"But it's a beautiful place. I love Memphis. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else because being from where I'm from is how we're able to just get up and go to a whole new environment and tough it out."

"It was hard and it sucked but I've been shot at so this is nothing."

Having never previously considered a career photographing and making films about climbing, Martin now finds himself in love with the sport.



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He says living in Memphis forces you to grow up fast, but that climbing offers you the opportunity to let your guard down.

He also understands the importance of representation in the sport and says stories need to be told by more Black filmmakers.

"Any time I point my cameras to amplify and uplift [...] being a Black filmmaker and connecting with Black people is important," he says.

"There is a difference, we can sit here and act like there isn't. There is a difference when it's based on documentaries, you know what I mean?"

"When you're sitting with people and talking with people and just being able to relate."

Martin has been on multiple trips with Ainuu since filming "Black Ice" and his social media feeds are now full of climbing content.

He recalls a moment during a trip with Ainuu last year when the importance of using his camera to inspire others hit home.

The pair were driving when Ainuu noticed a frozen pillar beside the road. Martin watched his friend jump out of the car, run across the road and start climbing it without ropes.

"From the hood, that would be quote-unquote 'White folk stuff,'" Martin says. "And to see a Black dude with dreads, in top peak prowess [...] is like 'wow!'"

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Austin Schmitz/ The North Face

Fred Campbell was one of the mentors in "Black Ice".

Allies in the sport

Since the trip to Montana, Martin has also fostered a strong relationship with Anker, who remains one of the world's top explorers and mountaineers.

Anker was one of the driving forces behind the film's conception, having previously visited Memphis Rox, and has long pushed for better diversity in outdoor pursuits.

Both Martin and Ainuu say it's vital to have White allies from within the sport.

"There's one thing for you to put a black square up on Instagram," says Martin.

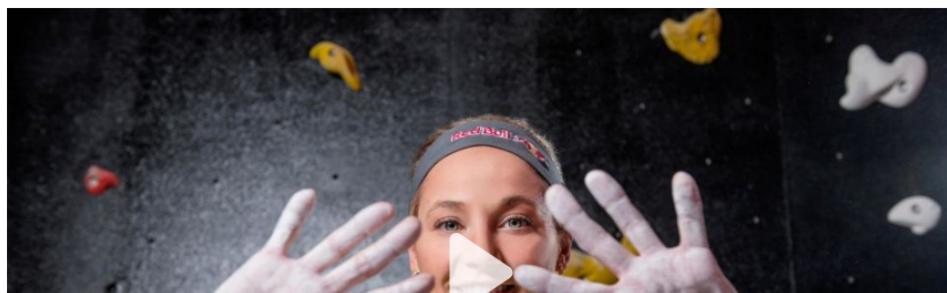
"Conrad understood for my life to change and for it to have any type of real social impact, he had to bring me into his circle of influence and him being a legend automatically stamps or certifies me to an extent."

Anker acknowledges that not enough has been done in the past to make climbing inclusive but says that things are changing.

Whilst organizations and events such as "Color The Crag" have been promoting diversity for years, Anker says the death of George Floyd in 2020 was a touchpoint for the global climbing community to hold a mirror up against itself.

"It's trying to change the view of how we look at climbing," Anker tells CNN Sport. "From its origin in the mid-1800s, seeing this as an athletic pursuit itself has always been the domain of the white male."

"Now as expeditions go forward, big expeditions, there is more inclusivity from both where one is from and also from a gender standpoint. Recognizing that and working to make it better is the first step."



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Sasha DiGiulian battles discrimination after being told "little girls don't belong here"

02:51 - Source: [CNN](#)

‘Reflection of society’

Anker hopes “Black Ice” will continue to encourage people from all backgrounds to adopt his love for climbing, which he says can be used as a tool to heal the deep divisions and racial tensions in the US.

“We’ve always revered mountains in all the world’s great religions,” he says.

“There’s always some connection to mountains. And when you’re out with someone, then that climbing with them is special.

“It’s a healthy way for humans to approach other humans. And so Memphis Rox, yes, it’s a climbing gym but, moreover, it’s a community center where these people are. It’s a really meaningful thing.

“Whilst climbing is a sport about going up mountains, moreover, it’s a transformational change in how humans interact with other humans and to foster this [...] is kind of my life’s goal.”

Campbell, one of the experts leading the team in Montana, echoes Anker’s praise of Memphis Rox but says there is no quick way to address the issue of diversity in climbing.

Instead, he calls on everyone from within the community to do their bit.

“Climbing is kind of a reflection of society,” Campbell tells CNN Sport.

“No part of society’s issues doesn’t make its way into climbing and so I think the solution has to be multifaceted.”

“Individual climbers have to be supportive of it and work to make the community really inclusive, and I think that’s something that we try to do on a personal level.

“Conrad, Manoah, Malik, all of us are really, really, really interested in being inclusive and making the sport accessible to everyone.”